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ABSTRACT

When serving economically disenfranchised African American children, school systems often unconsciously respond from a racist and class biased paradigm. Teachers often unconsciously operate from a framework of low expectations for these students' success. Society often supports the notion of students getting by with less because less is all the schools believe they can do. The Urban Atlanta Coalition Compact (UACC) is one current reform effort. As researchers engage with UACC schools that are struggling with ways to create better learning environments for African American children, they have observed that racism is a significant factor in the failure of schools to meet these students' academic needs. A 1997-99 research effort explored what could be done as a collaboration of schools and universities to remedy this situation. This paper discusses the early manifestations of racism encountered in the formation of the UACC project during its planning meetings with the steering committee, the boards of education, school leaders, parents, and other parties. Because of these experiences, part of the research was driven by the question of whether the prejudices, stereotypes, and misconceptions of well-intentioned educators sabotage educational reform efforts. The paper also explores reasons for the resistance of mainstream educators to discuss the impact of racist politics, economics, and educational theory on the school's capacity to teach all children. (Contains 33 references.) (SM)

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THE ELEPHANT IN THE LIVING ROOM: RACISM IN SCHOOL REFORM

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ABSTRACT

When serving economically disenfranchised African American children, school systems often unconsciously respond to those children from a racist and class biased paradigm. Many times without being aware of their own biases, teachers and others who serve these children, operate from a framework of low expectations of success for their students. Assuming that the capacity for learning is somehow hampered by the children's life circumstances, we as educators too often allow students to get by with less, because less is all we believe they can do. Society often supports these notions, thus, making it difficult for schools to shift their thinking.

We are presently working in a co-reform effort, the Urban Atlanta Coalition Compact (UACC). As we have engaged with UACC schools, who are struggling with ways to create better learning environments for African American children, we have observed that racism is a significant factor in the failure of the schools to meet these children's academic needs. We've asked ourselves how we, as a collaboration of schools and universities, can together confront the issue of racism and class bias in a meaningful way so that these children's capacities for learning are enriched not stifled?

One of our research efforts during the 1997-1999 school years explored this question and its implications in several of our schools. This paper discusses the early manifestations of racism encountered in the formation of the UACC Project during its planning, meetings with the Steering Committee, with Boards of Education, school leaders, parents, etc. Because of those experiences, part of our research is driven by the question: "Do the prejudices, stereotypes, and misconceptions of well-intentioned educators sabotage educational reform efforts?" This paper also explores reasons for the resistance of mainstream educators to discuss the impact of racist politics, economics, and educational theory on the school's capacity to teach all children.

The Elephant in the Living Room: Racism in School Reform

"Why is it that white women will not raise the issue of racism when engaged in serious conversation about issues that concern us as women?" That question spoken by Mattie,[1] an African American woman, at a women's retreat in Boston has troubled me for several years. At the retreat a small group of women from around the country and two women from other countries had come together to learn strategies for creating and sustaining meaningful dialogue with each other and with other more diverse groups to whom we were connected.

These women and I had spent a weekend together bonding as a newly formed group, experiencing the strategies we were there to investigate, and discussing issues that affect us as women in a world that seems to become increasingly hostile to women and children. Mattie's question emerged on the last day of the retreat, which means that we, the other fifteen women all of whom were white, had been there for two days consciously or unconsciously refusing to raise the issue of racism. Stunned by her question, I puzzled over my part in this group's willingness to remain silent about an issue that impacts every man, woman and child on the globe. What is it about racism that makes white people assume it concerns only people of color? Why is it that we seem unable to enter into honest discussion about it with each other, knowing that it plagues the planet? And what irony-- that fifteen supposedly intelligent and sensitive women had come together to learn new ways of talking openly and honestly about serious issues yet had ignored an issue so fundamental to our personal and societal realities. As a veteran teacher of almost thirty years, I could not help but wonder about the ramifications of those kinds of silences for all of our children in and out of school.

Because of those children in my life, I've sat with Mattie's question for a long time letting it simmer inside of me, wanting to let it go to keep it from gnawing at me. Though I

knew I had raised the issue of racism in all-white circles at other times in my past, I wondered what it was that kept me and the others oblivious to it this time. Avoiding the issue of racism concerns me most because of its consequences on children. I am frankly scared for those children that the political tenor of this country has turned toward a nazi-like paranoia of all groups of children and adults who are comprised of anything that is not mainstream, white Euro-centric. The internet, radio talk shows, and other media are full of vitriolic condemnations of diverse groups of people. In a 1997 issue of the Harvard Educational Review, Bartolome and Macedo echo this same fear:

"The racism and high level of xenophobia we are witnessing in our society today are not caused by isolated acts by individuals such as Limbaugh or . . . David Duke. Rather, these individuals are representatives of an orchestrated effort by segments of the dominant society to wage a war on the poor and on people who, by virtue of their race, ethnicity, language, and class are reduced at best to half-citizens, and at worst to a national enemy responsible for all the ills afflicting our society (Bartolome, 1997).

It seems too easy for those of us who think and feel differently about diversity to ignore the need of our voices in rebuttal. Hearing Toni Morrison in a recent television interview say, "When they send the trucks, I know who they are sending them for; they're sending them for me," I understood fully the danger of white people's failure to initiate the dialogue about racism--because I know Morrison is right. In fact, when I look at the statistics showing the disproportionate numbers of African-American males in prisons, the disproportionate numbers of children of color living below the poverty level, the numbers of children of color doomed to failure in our public schools, the numbers of inner-city ghettos, and Native American reservations, I think we've already sent the trucks. Those trucks in Nazi Germany could have been stopped. One of the factors that allowed them to operate was the early silent global complicity about the persecution of Jewish people. Silence can be dangerous. We have a chance to stop those trucks. We've been silent long enough. As members of the dominant

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[1] A fictitious name

culture, we must say out loud that racism is crippling our nation, ravaging our children, and draining the country of its most precious resource, brilliant human minds.

When I think of our crippled nation, I remember the devastating costs of such silences in the history of this country--- during the bloody days of slavery---the days of segregation in the south, lynchings, and brutal, "secret" murders. I think, too, of *The Crucible* (1953), an American play written in the 1950's to remind us of the Salem witch trials. The protagonist, John Proctor, remains silent about the witch hunts until it is too late, and "murder is loose in Salem." His reluctance to publicly condemn the antics of the children who were leading these hunts allowed hundreds of women to go to their deaths. And I think of the McCarthy hearings, the reason Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible*, and of all the innocents who were damaged by the silence of respectable people who were afraid to call a "witch hunt" a "witch hunt." I don't think we who understand and have seen the "witch hunts" of racism can remain silent any longer.

Yet today we are silent about the backlash in California against the children of "illegal" immigrants? Our people there supported legislation that refuses immigrant children health care and education. Yet these same middle class and wealthy Californians hire the mothers and fathers of those children to work the soil of mainstream farms, pick their crops, clean their houses, become surrogate mothers to their children. How do we ignore this punishment of immigrant children, knowing that all of us in the dominant culture are ultimately descendents of "illegal immigrants" in a land originally stewarded by Native Americans. Could it be that in California the Mexicans are coming back to claim the land that was taken from them?

But it is the silence of white women that particularly concerns and confounds me. Concerns me because in the state of Georgia over 80% of the teachers in our schools are white women; therefore, if we don't confront the issue for our children in schools, who will ever voice

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it in the larger context? (GPTV, 1996) When 56% of the children expelled from Georgia schools are African American boys, yet they represent only 16% of the total school population, how can we remain silent about racism, pretending it isn't a factor? (MRI, 1995) African American students make up 16.5 percent of the national public school enrollment, yet they represent 28.7 percent of children in special education classrooms (Status of Education, 1997). With those kinds of disproportionate numbers, how can we excuse ourselves from addressing the issue?

Our silence confounds me because we as women are considered by the larger society to be the nurturers, the protectors of children, the very life's blood of children. Yet here we sit, most of us, in comfort while over 12 million children live in poverty (Shames, 1991). Millions of American children go to bed hungry every night because of a racist system of economics and politics. And too many of us do nothing, assuming the problem is too big for us to tackle. But we can do something. We can educate our students about racist politics and economics, then maybe millions of children won't always go to bed hungry.

Volumes have been written about the damage of educational racism on children of color. The research is replete with our inability to teach these children because of our unconscious racist assumptions about their ability to learn. When serving economically disenfranchised African American children, school systems often assume that because these children are poor and because their culture is different from the mainstream, these students will be unable to achieve academically at the same levels as their white counterparts. Many times without being aware of their own biases, teachers and others who serve these children, operate from a framework of low expectations of success for these children. Assuming that the capacity for learning is somehow hampered by the children's life circumstances, we as educators too often allow these children to get by with less, because less is all we believe they can do. Society in

general supports these notions, thus, making it difficult for schools to shift their thinking. Recently, when asked by a local reporter about the possibility of raising the test scores of children in the Atlanta Public Schools, the senior director of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), H. D. Hoover, said that "placing heavy pressure on schools probably will result in higher test scores but he wouldn't trust the validity of those results" (AJC, 1999). He added further that:

> You can't all of a sudden – boom! --- turn kids into good readers overnight. Atlanta as a large city district, has all kinds of issues associated with the **nature of kids** and the way they come to school that make things tougher than in a nice suburban community.

Not only is Hoover suggesting that if the test scores are raised, then the system is probably cheating, but also that somehow the nature of inner city children is flawed. That flawed nature, he insinuates, makes them incapable of making great strides in learning within short periods of time---unlike their mainstream counterparts in those "nice suburban communities."

His racist remarks, that were possibly unconsciously racist, went completely unchallenged by the reporter. How can we continue to remain silent about the impact of racist thinking on our children when these kinds of notions by supposed experts are routinely espoused in the media as though they were fact?

Nowhere is this thinking more blatant than in the text, *The Bell Curve*. In that best selling book, the authors, who get standing room only audiences across the country whenever they speak, say:

> People in the bottom quartile of intelligence are becoming not just increasingly expendable in economic terms; they will sometime in the not-too-distant future become a net drag. In economic terms and barring a profound change in direction for our society, many people will be unable to perform that function so basic to human dignity: putting more into the world than they take out. . . .For many people, there is nothing they can learn that will repay the cost of the teaching." (Murray, 1994)

The authors' conclusions about the unworthiness of educating the underachiever, specifically the urban poor, are alarming and certainly underscore the reality of Toni Morrison's perception of the vulnerability of African Americans in our society. With the constant

controversy concerning the validity of IQ testing, barring brain-damage, how can these authors or anyone else say with authority what a person's learning potential is.

Yet consistently educational experts continue to bombard us with the belief that the learning potential of children of the urban poor is forever limited. In 1997, *Education Week* published an article by Richard Rothstein where he said that "Academic performance of the [Los Angeles] district's students will always be and should always be considerably below national averages." He bases this argument on the supposed fact that "For 30 years, experts have acknowledged that the most important determinants of student achievement are family and community characteristics." As I will share later, the research of many more educational experts have found the absolute opposite to be true. He continues, however, insisting that "Children from literate homes with secure economic environments will always, on average, have better academic outcomes than children without these advantages." Therefore, he later concludes that inner-city teachers "who guide their students to the 30th percentile on national achievement tests may bring as much 'value added' to the educational process as teachers in more comfortable communities where students coast to the 70th percentile" (Rothstein, 1997). He, thereby, releases any responsibility for teachers and schools in inner-city neighborhoods to demand excellence from their students because he believes that mediocrity is the best these students can give.

Yet African American scholars and practitioners like Asa Hilliard and Barbara Sizemore (Hilliard, 1991, Sizemore, 1982) have documented a multitude of effective schools where the majority of students who attend those schools come from single parent, poor neighborhoods or housing projects yet achieve academic excellence and knock the tops off of national standardized tests. These high achieving schools produce successful students, despite extreme poverty or dysfunctional home environments. Such schools exist in communities around the country, in Los

Angeles, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Lansing, West Virginia, Texas, etc. Many of these schools operate on ridiculously low budgets and limited resources, yet common to all is a firm belief and demand that their children will excel. I find it interesting that few, if any, mainstream scholars ever investigate or cite these schools.

The passages from the current literature that suggest limited possibilities for the children of the poor, especially those of color, illustrate the pervasive and insidious nature of the messages sent by, I assume, well intentioned educational experts. To suppose that teachers walk into classrooms untouched by these biases is naïve. For many who teach, there seems to be a struggle to, first, believe that all children not only can learn but do learn and are always learning. Whether it be what we want them to learn or not, all children are innately curious and they are in the constant process of learning. And second, it seems to be a struggle for many teachers to believe that they can teach all children. Yet to be a good teacher, both beliefs are imperative before we can expect to be effective teaching any children. All children regardless of their socioeconomic status, whether their mother is on drugs or their daddy is in jail will learn and do learn at prodigious rates. And as long as we believe we can teach them and, therefore, demand that they achieve academic excellence, they will learn whatever it is we want to teach them. (Hilliard, 1998). A number of research studies have documented that most children, regardless of socio-economic backgrounds, come to school with the same capacity to learn and at the same performance levels, yet the longer most African American children of the poor are in school, the more they fall behind (Levin, 1988). This fact, to me, seems an indictment of the inability of the school rather than the incapacity of the student.

In 1995, The Educational Policy Research Institute in West Virginia completed a two-year study of elementary schools in their state. The results of the study convinced the researchers that:

> Effective student performance *is* possible despite extreme adverse conditions. In fact, this research identified high student achievement in effective elementary schools irrespective of the degree of poverty, high or low parent education, high or low parent income or high or low parent involvement (Hughes, 1995).

What makes us pay so little attention to studies such as these?

Hilliard, in his speech at the 9th Annual Benjamin E. Mays Lecture, insisted that:

> We have millions of children in urban schools, many of whom do not perform high enough to meet the minimum standards required within the school systems and certainly not standards that anyone would recognize as national standards. . . . It is hard to escape the facts about low performing children in urban schools . . . But for a growing number of educators, such performances are unacceptable. Many of my colleagues and I have experienced a very different tradition. We know what is possible and how to produce it. . . . that there really is no pedagogical problem to producing academic success among children no matter what their social class, cultural, or gender circumstances may be (1997).

Because I have taught and worked with teachers in urban schools all of my professional life, like Hilliard, I, too, believe that the fault of low achievement of many children in urban schools lies not with the children, but with the educational systems that devour them. I and my colleagues in the Urban Atlanta Coalition Compact (UACC) who are engaged with six public schools in a co-reform effort are exploring ways to create better learning environments for economically disenfranchised African American children. This project was initiated and is driven by the research and vision of Dr. Lisa Delpit who passionately believes and has documented that poor African American children like all other children are brilliant and only wait for us to help that brilliance unfold. Yet, in this collaborative reform effort, whose Principal Investigator and Director are both African American women, we have observed that the same insidious messages of racism, repeated by the Rothsteins of the world, play a significant role in the failure of the schools to meet these children's academic needs. However, as Mattie had suggested at the Boston retreat, no one seems to want to name it. No one wants to say the word out loud. As a

consequence, I keep hearing Mattie's question ringing in my ear. Why won't white folks raise the issue? Why don't we want to confront it head on? Part of the answer probably lies in the fact that our "White privilege" allows us to benefit from racism---whether we are conscious or unconscious of that privilege. A decade ago, Peggy McIntosh, a White feminist scholar, listed the many societal privileges that she received simply because she was White (McIntosh, 1989). Knowing this to be a reality, however, I still cannot fully answer Mattie. I think there's more at stake than even privilege.

Nevertheless, I seem compelled to explore the question for two reasons. One is that my personal history is interwoven in the history of America's racism. I grew up in a segregated South. I rode buses where African Americans sat in the back. I drank from "white only" fountains, and frequented "white only" restaurants. My youth was spent in the midst of Jim Crow laws. My schooling was in all-white classrooms. The second reason is that as an educator, I've witnessed the consequences of racism on children's learning. So the impact of racism on people's lives has been a theme in my life, all of my life.

And I think I've been asking myself Mattie's question since I was eight years old, when I was first visually assaulted by the perverse consequences of the Jim Crow laws. I had returned home one day from my segregated Catholic school and picked up a copy of *Life* magazine from the coffee table. *Life's* camera had caught the images of two six-year-old black children who, attempting to be the first to integrate the schools of Little Rock, Arkansas, were walking down a street lined on either side with angry white adults. In that same photo, National Guard soldiers stood as the only barriers between those two small children and the hostile bodies of hundreds of grown men and women. What stuns me even now as I bring it back from memory, is the image of the thick, heavy chains that many of those men and women

held, threateningly waving them, shouting taunts at those two young, but courageous children. Though later in my life, I have read books and seen movies that detailed more horrific depictions of racial hatred, that picture remains the most vivid--- the anger, the chains, and the sheer numbers of adults intimidating two vulnerable and innocent children. What in the world could so twist adult human beings that they would want to strike out that menacingly at such small, defenseless beings? With the picture of those chains, *Life* magazine had dramatically captured for me, even as an eight-year-old, the moral deprivation that racism inflicts on the racist, thereby, diminishing the whole community. That consequence on the spiritual lives of the privileged seems today as ignored as the debilitating consequences of racism on the lives of its victims---a systemic reality that ultimately makes us all victims, even though some of us materially benefit from it.

But the victimization of children is still my major concern. Too often, while working with the UACC as well as with other projects, I sit at meetings and listen to well meaning white educators discussing the low academic achievement levels of the urban child. These educators seem sincere in wanting to change that reality, yet they never raise the issue of the impact on classroom instruction of racist assumptions about the capacity of poor children of color to learn. Scholars like Bartolome and Macedo, nevertheless, insist that, "As the end of the century draws closer, one of the most pressing challenges facing educators in the United States is the specter of an 'ethnic and cultural war,' which constitute, in our view, a code phrase that engenders our society's licentiousness toward racism"(1997, p. 223). I, too, believe that it is one of our most pressing problems. So when will we as white educators bring it to the table for discussion?

That discussion drives part of our work in the UACC. In our reform effort, we continue to ask ourselves and our partners to investigate the consequences of racist thinking on the

academic performance of urban children. Our work demands that we explore how, as a community of educators who are committed to empowering children to excel academically, we can together confront the issue of racism and class bias in a meaningful way so that our children's capacities for learning are enriched not stifled?"

In a recent article in *Educational Leadership*, Sandra Parks explains our challenge. She said, " Past and present conditions of racism contribute to reduced expectations, opportunities, and resources for students of color who live in poverty. The influences of racism result in policies and conditions that are debilitating for children and young adults, perpetuating rather than reducing the cycle of poverty"(Parks, 1999, p.18).

In the rest of my discussion I have used the terms culture and ethnicity wherever possible when talking about the issue of "race" because I have been persuaded by the work of a number of African scholars that there is only one race, the human race, and that the "racial" differences amongst us are actually cultural and/or ethnic. From these studies, I have learned that the construct of different races was developed four hundred years ago to further divide people for the purposes of domination (Carruthers, 1997). Unfortunately, because the construct of race is so ingrained in the language and in our minds, at times it becomes necessary to use the term "race" to explain people's unconscious rationales for particular behavior.

Patricia Williams suggests that "Racism is a gaze that insists upon the power to make others conform, to perform endlessly in the prison of prior expectation, circling repetitively back upon the expired utility of the entirely known"(Williams, 1997). Her definition seemed to manifest itself in some of the UACC schools. There was an insistence in some of our schools, during interviews and various program evaluations, that what mainstream educators and researchers have discovered as pedagogical truths are universally suitable for all children,

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regardless of their cultural heritage. There was also an insistence by both white and African American teachers that the children of the poor, especially children of color, have been so "impoverished" by their life circumstances, that we can expect very little from them in academic achievement, and that the best we should hope for is to give them "life skills" and get them ready for jobs.

But, as Williams' definition suggests, our educational success with economically disenfranchised African American children is thwarted because we are "imprisoned" by our expectations of failure for these children. Some of our UACC teachers, as well as many other educators across the country, share a pervasive attitude that there is nothing of merit that these children bring to the classroom; that there is nothing of value happening in their communities; and that any change that happens must happen in the "disadvantaged" children and their homes, not in the classroom and the school. Because what teachers do and know is often unquestioned by them, they assume that the trouble lies in what the students don't know, rather than in what the teachers don't know about the students. Therefore, again as Williams' definition of racism suggests, there is a constant circling back to the uselessness of known mono-cultural strategies and curriculum.

An even bigger surprise, however, than this insistence in education on the pedagogy of the dominant culture ---the insistence to do more of what is not working for the urban poor--- awaited me as I worked with the UACC. That surprise was the reluctance of mainstream educators to accept the perceptions and experiences of African American scholars. I watched astounded over and over again as white educators ignored the lessons learned by African American scholars whose national and international reputations had been built on substantial research and practices examining how urban children of color learn. Exposed to these

scholars'expertise, mainstream teachers and administrators, knowing their schools were failing African American children, still seemed not only to resist but to resent suggestions based on this proven research.

In addition, I was always surprised when local foundations denied funding to such scholars while at the same time making major contributions to white organizations who had no record of success in urban schools. Wherever those decisions were made, I wish Mattie had been there to raise her question. I wish somebody had asked these program directors why they insisted on giving money to unproven white educators to tamper with urban schools where African American children are miserably educated, while turning their backs on the work of famous African American researchers with successful track records. How can I reasonably assume that racism, unconscious or not, plays no part in the decisions of these foundations?

Some of my African American colleagues have cautioned me to maintain a balanced view when I look at this thing called racism. They have encouraged me to avoid demonizing white people. I have made a sincere effort to think within those parameters. For I really do believe as Adam Michnik, a Polish freedom fighter once said, "There are no angels, no maggots" (Schell, 1986). Somewhere in our collective histories, there's probably blood on all of our hands. I believe, too, what Parks says that, "Learning to face racism and to talk about it transformatively with others requires compassion toward oneself and others." (1999) But when one of my white colleagues suggested I call racism something else when speaking about individuals trapped by it, I began to wonder that if I became too concerned about a balanced view, I might lose sight of the very thing I was trying to get a handle on. If we can't say racism out loud because the word may offend those whom it doesn't exactly fit, then how do we eradicate the disease that's bloodying all of our children. It becomes the elephant in the living room that everybody

pretends isn't there. And my experience has taught me that white people want to call racism everything but racism. We will explain it as personality clashes, misunderstandings, over-sensitivity, impropriety, and a hundred other euphemisms. We will call it anything but what it is to avoid recognizing our silent complicity in it. Refusing to call its name reminds me of the military calling missiles, which tear bodies, buildings, and whole cities to bloody shreds, "peace keepers." Our language often masks our hypocricies. Thus, for my own need to keep myself from abandoning Mattie's challenge, I must say the word aloud, racism.

As Beverly Tatum suggests, institutional racism and white privilege is so imbued in American culture, history, politics, and economics that it becomes like smog in Los Angeles; if you live and breathe in L.A., you are a smog breather. Living in a racist culture, we consciously or unconsciously breathe in racism (Tatum, 1997, p. 6). Another understanding about racism that is important to grapple with is the impossibility of "reverse racism." Many of us white people whine about this mistaken notion whenever people of color seem to "prejudge" us. Yet if we understand racism as *"a system of advantage based on race [ethnicity]; a form of oppression which is the systematic subjugation of a social group by another social group with access to social power----and that racism = power + prejudice*" (Wellman, 1977), then, I believe we should be able to understand that people of color can be prejudiced but not racist. There is only one culture in this country that has overwhelming power in all of our institutions, and it is not African American. "Every social indicator, from salary to life expectancy," as Tatum says, "reveals the advantages of being white (1997, p. 8).

Because of the ingrained reality of racism in our culture, I also believe that the best we in the dominant culture can be is recovering racists (Reflections, 1997, p.22). But if we don't come out of denial, we will never be able to be in recovery. Calling ourselves and others racists is, of

course, unproductive; however recognizing our racist assumptions as they unfold is essential. As Probst suggests if we don't question "culturally established norms," they "become so deeply ingrained in consciousness that they come to seem as substantial and immutable as physical reality itself"(Probst, 1984). We become "trapped" by our single cultural lens.

Tatum's and Probst's definitions consistently manifested themselves in the work of UACC. In the earliest discussions of funding for the project, issues of ethnicity arose. In a steering committee meeting when members were discussing the language used in the proposal for initial funding, one of the members, an African American educational consultant, suggested that we take the words African American out of the proposal when identifying the children we would target. He said that some foundations might reject the proposal because it specifically designated African American children. A discussion of the efficacy of keeping that description in the proposal ensued amongst the fifteen committee members, a committee comprised of mixed ethnicity, gender, and professions. The committee's conversation ended when one of its members, an elementary school teacher, insisted that because African American children across this country were systematically poorly served in educational institutions, deliberately acknowledging a focus on these children demonstrated an honest attempt to address the problem. That the very naming of the ethnicity of these children could be seen as a problem suggests the power of the unconscious societal agreement to be silent about anything that evokes "race."

When funding finally became a reality for the UACC, we made presentations about the project to the three different school systems who had been contacted concerning their interest in becoming involved in the project. After the central administration of one system decided to invite their elementary schools to apply for the two available slots, I received a phone call from their associate superintendent. He revealed that their Board was concerned about the piece of the

proposal that designated the target student population as African American. He asked if I would mind coming to the next board meeting to explain the project to the board and the staff who would be attending the meeting. This particular board is part of a system where the majority of students are white and about 40% of the students are African American. The district-wide test scores indicate that the performance of the majority of their African American students is far below that of their mainstream children. Because of that reality, the Central Administration, especially the associate superintendent, was enthusiastic about the possibility of our co-reform effort supporting their attempts to change this discrepancy in their ability to teach all of their children. Some of its board members, however, did not want to support the initiative.

Consequently, I attended their meeting and explained the main components of the project. At the end of my presentation, one of the board members, a white female, asked a number of questions about the project. Her major concern about the UACC, she said, was the targeting of one segment of the district's student population. At one point she also asked just what we meant by the term, "children of color." With each question, I attempted to explain the necessity of targeting those children who are least well served by public schools because reform efforts have taught us that if we don't specifically target them, nothing changes for them.

The seven member board (five Caucasians and two African Americans) eventually approved the proposal with one dissenting vote, that of the white female. Her resistance to citing ethnicity seemed symptomatic of the complicity in this nation to deny the reality of racism. Even with the district's hard data of test scores that reveal its failure to create an environment where African American children can excel, part of its ruling board still wanted to ignore the reality that issues of ethnic inequities played a major role in the system's incapacity to raise the

achievement level of all of their students. Nonetheless, two of the district's elementary schools eventually applied for participation in the UACC.

After all three of the systems approved the proposal for participation in the project, the selection process began.[2] During that process, again issues of cultural differences manifested themselves. Part of the selection process included visits of two or three steering committee members to each of the schools meeting with leadership teams, with random teachers in their classrooms, and with parents. Because we had no director of the project at that time, I visited all of the schools, talking to teachers, administrators, and parents as well as looking at school documents that addressed institutional vision, mission, goals, and records of student achievement. Two of the schools (Peters & Winchell Elementary[3]) who applied have white female principals and majority white faculties. One of those schools has a majority white student population, and the other has an African American student population.

At Winchell when the African American parent representatives, invited by the principal that day, were interviewed, they complained about their feelings of alienation from the school; of their sense that African American children at Winchell were retained at higher rates than the mainstream children; and of their frustrations that their children were treated differently from the other children at the school (Wynne, 1997). Several mentioned that when they came to visit their children in the school, they felt unwelcome. After the hour's session with the parents, I asked the principal if I could meet with her whole faculty and share the perceptions and issues raised

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[2] Selection was based on signed commitments by the schools that included:

1. Agreement of school administration to engage in collaborative decision-making with faculty and staff
2. Agreement by teachers (80%) to staff development and to engagement in the planning and the implementation process to create an exceptional learning setting for low-income children of color
3. Agreement to seek parental involvement and support for this effort
4. Agreement to take on the role of a teaching learning site as a source of assistance for other schools attempting to change.
5. Utilization of community resources

[3] Fictitious names for both schools

by these parents. My request was based on my need to ascertain the willingness of her staff to address the concerns of their African American parents and to make any necessary instructional or institutional changes. I walked away from that 1-1/2 hour meeting with serious doubts about the faculty's level of awareness of their own ethnic biases. They had spent that hour blaming the parents for being disconnected to the school and for their unwillingness or inability to help the children at home with their studies. In this discussion, the staff manifested a defensiveness about the school's failure to raise the achievement level of their African American students by consistently reminding me of the learning deficits of these children due to their "impoverished" backgrounds and lack of parent involvement, a defensiveness that forced their unconscious racist attitudes to bubble to the surface.

After the meeting, I brought back to the selection committee my reservations about Winchell's selection. An in-depth dialogue ensued about the efficacy of accepting their application. After a full discussion, it was agreed that the committee would accept them as a partner in the reform effort for two reasons. The first was that the leadership at Winchell as well as the staff had vowed they were committed to school change that would more effectively raise the level of achievement for their African American students. The staff consistently in their interviews acknowledged their need for help in raising the level of achievement of their African American students. The second reason for Winchell's selection was that the committee believed the school probably reflected the ethnic make-up of a large percentage of schools around the country; and, thus, if the partnership could effect positive change at Winchell, more African American students in the nation might benefit from the experiment.

Once the schools had been selected, the work began. Because the actual monies for the grant were slow in coming, we had to delay the hiring of a director. Thus, I remained intimately

involved with the initiation of the project. Our first meeting was a two-day overnight orientation retreat held in early August, designed to build relationship among the schools and universities and to communicate the mission and goals of the project. Fifteen constituents from each school, including parents, staff, and teachers were invited as well as university fellows and district administrators. Most schools sent at least twelve participants. During the retreat it became obvious that everyone there sincerely wanted to raise the academic achievement of the schools' African American students. Cultural differences, however, surfaced immediately as participants responded to the different retreat experiences. The mainstream faculty responded less favorably to experiences that incorporated music and relationship building, feeling those experiences took too much time away from discussion of goals and strategies. While the African Americans responded positively to goals and strategy sessions, they expressed a greater interest than their white counterparts in team building activities. And three of the majority African American faculties repeated the team building experiences for their faculties when they returned to school in the fall. These early responses reflected the difference in preferences manifested in the two cultures in the context of the larger society. Wade Nobles suggests that typically, central to the African worldview is the necessity for the sense of relatedness, the belief that "I am because we are," a philosophy that reveres community (Nobles, 1973). The Western worldview is typified by Descartes' notion, "I think; therefore, I am," a philosophy that holds sacred individual rights. Over and again, these two conflicting views played themselves out in the discussions of the individual schools on how they could change to meet the academic needs of their African American students. White faculty often assumed that specific strategies, programs, or more outside tutors were the answer to the problem of low achievement, rarely examining the teacher's relationship to her students as a legitimate means of impacting the achievement levels

of these children. In fact, in only one of my interviews with white faculty was the instructional benefit of a personal relationship with students ever specifically mentioned, and this teacher devoted her Friday evenings to spending time with individual students. There were, of course, other instances of white teachers creating classrooms where African American children could excel; however, too many teachers seemed unaware of their inability to connect with their students.

Although manifestations of racist assumptions unfolded during our first year, we were convinced that most of the teachers and staff, both white and black, that we worked with consciously wanted their African American children to achieve. The fact that they were in denial of any racist suppositions about children speaks to, I think, the pervasiveness of those notions in the larger society, making it all the more difficult for these educators to recognize their own biases. Their failure to see through these assumptions seems to strengthen Tatum's explanation of the power of institutional racism.

Besides recognizing denial, though, what was also important to understand while participating in the work of UACC was another outcome of our racist culture: "internalized oppression . . . believing the distorted messages about one's own group"(Tatum, p.6). During those first selection interviews, I began to notice that many of the African American teachers had somehow swallowed the racist notions of the dominant culture against their own children. As often is true with oppressed peoples, the distortions of the oppressor become the beliefs of the oppressed. These teachers, too, could be heard blaming the children's low academic achievement on the plight of their parents, on the consequences of their poverty, and on the intellectual damage of these children due to their "disadvantaged" backgrounds. I had come up against this before when working with teachers in other public schools. Once an African American teacher,

at a middle school serving children who lived in a housing project, informed me that her class of low achieving science students could not go to the science laboratory because they could only handle "pencil and paper work." She insisted that they didn't have the social skills needed for laboratory work, and, evidently, saw no responsibility to teach them those skills.

As I visited all of the UACC schools, some of the insights I received by talking to their teachers led me to believe that most of the schools' faculties lacked a sense of the potential genius of the children they taught (Delpit, 1997). They consistently talked about the shortcomings of the children, the skills they lacked, the poor neighborhoods they lived in, the lack of appropriate encouragement for schooling from their parents, the consequences of their poverty, the negative impact of their single parent homes, etc. There was almost always a sense of doom about the chances of these children to excel. In none of the interviews did I hear teachers or administrators mention the strengths of these students. Often during the interview process, after a litany of deficits was proclaimed, I interjected the question: "What are these students' strengths?" Too many times there was complete silence while teachers or administrators struggled to think of some. Moreover, their voices seemed to echo the larger society's notion that the people in poverty, not the economic and political systems, are the cause of their own dilemma.

Because of this propensity of most of the faculties to externalize the causes for the academic failure of these children, I wanted our first Town Meeting[4] of representatives from all the schools to focus on the "Ten Factors Essential to Success in Urban Classrooms"[5] that Delpit

[4] A gathering of faculty, parent, administration representatives from all seven schools to cross-pollinate best practices and common challenges across districts

[5] Lisa Delpit, "Ten Factors Essential to Success in Urban Classrooms":

1. Do not teach less content to poor, urban children, but understand their brilliance and teach **more!**
2. Whatever methodology or instructional program is used, demand critical thinking.
3. Assure that all children gain access to "basic skills," the conventions and strategies that are essential to success in American education.

had developed. I thought her research discoveries, grounded in building instruction on the strengths of our urban children, their families, and their culture, could inform the individual and collective investigations for school reform. For I knew that her writing and research had worked magic on thousands of educators like me. Thus, I believed a discussion of her principles might help to dispel the schools' general acceptance that poor African American children, as Rothstein insists, could only achieve at minimal levels. After Delpit's talk, however, to my amazement, many of the white faculty and administrators present walked away thinking they had heard her say that only African American teachers could effectively teach African American children. Because I was there and I had heard no such reference or intimation made by Delpit, I asked several of those teachers for the specifics which had given them that impression. None of them could pin point any particular word or words. Several mentioned, however, that when Delpit cited examples of teachers who used the culture of the children as part of their classroom instruction, she was insinuating that only African Americans could know that culture; therefore, only they were most suitable to teach their children. The irony of the misconception of these teachers is that Delpit said at that very meeting that some African American teachers don't understand the culture of the urban poor and, thus, are ineffective. She also stated that some white teachers are excellent teachers of African American children.

The repercussions of that same misconception arose again months later when I was teaching a Master's methodology course for the university. One of the students who enrolled was a white teacher from one of the UACC schools. On a night when I was explaining the

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4. Provide the emotional ego strength to challenge racist societal views of the competence and worthiness of the children and their families.
5. Recognize and build on strengths.
6. Use familiar metaphors and experiences from the children's world to connect what they already know to school knowledge.
7. Create a sense of family and caring.
8. Monitor and assess needs and then **address** them with a wealth of **diverse** strategies.
9. Honor and respect the children's home culture(s).

mission of the UACC to the class, the teacher reiterated the same contention, that at the first Town meeting, Delpit had claimed only African Americans could effectively teach African American children. Once again I asked if the teacher remembered what Delpit had said that implied such a belief. The teacher then admitted that she actually had not attended the meeting, but that she had heard a conversation of teachers at her school who insisted that Delpit had voiced this assumption. Because I know Delpit's work well, I know that she sometimes uses the work of white teachers as examples of exemplary teaching. My professional experience in working with her convinces me that she harbors no such belief about the innate incapacity of white teachers to effectively teach African American children. I also know that she insisted on including white educators and other professionals in the work of the UACC as steering committee members, as university fellows, as associate director of her Center for Excellence in Urban Education. The evidence of her amazing openness to the voices of others should have prevented anyone from assuming she held a bias against white educators. The consistent misconceptions, though, reminded me of how easily people's pre-dispositions can distort information heard, as discussed in Rokeach's research concerning ethnocentrism:

> Persons who are high in ethnic prejudice and or authoritarianism, as compared with persons who are low, are more rigid in their problem-solving behavior, more concrete in their thinking, and more narrow in their grasp of a particular subject; they also have a greater tendency to premature closure in their perceptual processes and to distortions in memory, and a greater tendency to be intolerant of ambiguity (Rokeach, 1960).

His research discoveries again and again became apparent in our work. Because of the unconscious ethnic and class prejudice of many of our teachers, parents, and administrators, research by African American scholars was distorted, ignored, or disbelieved. The propensity of some to stick to the "known" in their problem solving about raising the achievement level of their African American students without exploring the new ideas the Compact offered indicated the trap of their unconscious ethnocentrism.

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10. Foster a sense of children's connection to community – to something greater than themselves

Shortly after the Town Meeting which was held in November of the first year, the white principal of Peters Elementary, a school with predominantly white faculty and majority African American students, without consulting her faculty chose to withdraw from the UACC. This particular principal, Ms. Feldman,[9] was the only principal who had not attended the Orientation Retreat. This may have been a factor in her lack of connection to the work of UACC. One of the major reasons she gave for withdrawing from the project was its divisive quality. She blamed the UACC for splitting her faculty along "racial lines." I have found in my years of work with schools as well as other organizations that when racism becomes obvious to the community at large, the culprit becomes whomever brought it to light, a diversity consultant, a diversity committee, student committees examining the issue, etc. So Ms. Feldman's mistaken source of blame for the divisiveness of her faculty came as no surprise, given that in our early interviews, members of her faculty complained about the division of the staff between white and black.

Later when I interviewed representatives of Peters Elementary about their exit[*] from the project, the division as well as unconscious racist beliefs about the children surfaced.

One of the white staff, Ms. Smith[5], when interviewed said, "It broke my heart when the principal made the unilateral decision for the school to end its partnership with the UACC. I, in

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[9] Fictitious name

[*] EXIT QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think causes the academic failure of the low achieving African American students in your school?
2. What plans have you or the faculty made to raise the level of achievement of these children?
3. What parts of the Urban Atlanta Coalition Compact worked well for your elementary?
4. What parts of the Compact did not work well for your school?
5. What have you learned about the culture of the African American students at your school?
6. What do you see as the strengths of your African American students?
7. What do you want your African American students to know and to be able to do?
8. What are some of the staff development needs of your faculty?
9. What is the involvement of your African American parents at your school?
10. What plans are being made for more inclusion of these parents in your academic programs?
11. If you were given extra money to use to enhance your teaching capacity, how would you spend it?
12. *If you were given extra time to use to enhance your teaching capacity, how would you use it?*
13. What do you think is the most uniquely beneficial piece of the work of the UACC as it relates to school reform?
14. What do you think that the UACC could do to be more effective?

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the beginning did believe, and still do, that the project offered our best hope to change the achievement level of our kids." In her authentic attempt to be fair in her assessment of the reasons for the quick exit, the staff member explained it as a result of mutual misunderstandings and miscommunications between the university partners and the school's administrator and staff. She, however, mentioned at great length, the perception of the white faculty who attended the Town Meeting that Delpit had proclaimed the inability of white teachers to teach African American children. The respondent insisted that the young white teachers had come away from that meeting with the impression that they were "inadequate" as teachers. The respondent also reported that the white faculty kept asking: "After African-centered pedagogy, then what?" She intimated that the African-centered classroom activities suggested by some of the African American teachers as a way of being more responsive to the children's culture seemed inconsequential to the white teachers as a means of teaching "basic skills."

When asked later in the interview if racism had played a role in the demise of the partnership, she insisted that while racism was a societal problem, she felt it had little impact on the problems in her school because "the young white teachers today don't share the prejudices and ignorance that white people of our generation did. They [young white teachers] live in integrated neighborhoods, have shared experiences like "cheerleading camps" with other cultures, are exposed to other cultures more than we were." Though her assumptions here may be accurate, they still do not take in the failure of those kinds of experiences to change institutional racism. No matter the increased exposure of whites to African Americans, societal racism is still alive, well, and wreaking havoc on children, even if unconsciously so by the mainstream masses.

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15. How significant a role do ethnic differences play in your school environment?
16. To what parts of the UACC would you like to continue to be connected?

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Ms. Smith's biggest criticism of the project was its invitation to one of Peters' faculty to become a member of the UACC steering committee without first consulting the faculty. She insisted that the administrators of the Compact should have asked Peters' staff to choose a representative from their school, a concern which seemed completely legitimate, and a decision that we had regretted immediately after it was made and immediately had rectified. Ms. Smith also insisted that none of the staff would have ever chosen the teacher that we had invited. Nevertheless, knowing that the person selected was an African American teacher, and noticing the inordinate amount of time Ms. Smith seemed to want to talk about this decision, I wondered if there were other unspoken issues underlying her comments.

For my initial exit interview, I had deliberately chosen Ms. Smith to interview because she had been with the project from the first orientation meeting, had early on verbalized an enthusiasm for the project, and had actively participated in the work the several months that the school was a partner. I sensed that she was well intentioned and that she sincerely wanted what was best for the children at her school. She seemed, however, unable to recognize the role racist notions about children played in the failure of the school to adequately teach its students---an inability that typified responses made by most white partners in all of the schools.

When I asked Ms. Smith what she thought was the cause of the academic failure of the low achieving students at her school, she blamed the failure on the lack of proper nutrition and health care both prenatal and pre-school, the lack of education of parents, the conditions of poverty, the lack of appropriate parental support, etc. There was never a mention of instructional inadequacy, only child and parental flaws. Again her responses were not unique. They typified the assumptions of many faculty members at all of the schools. And as she talked, I couldn't help but remember saying similar things about the families of my "disadvantaged" students

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[5] Fictitious name

almost thirty years ago as a first year teacher when I taught in an African American high school located in a low-income neighborhood. Had it not been for a group of African American teachers who took me under their wing that first year, and taught me how to teach, I might still be saying the exact same words as Ms. Smith. Her comments especially saddened me because I sensed that she wanted her students to achieve, yet had no understanding of the insidious nature of the assumptions she held as truth, assumptions that kept her students from achieving. And sometimes I wonder how could she understand when there is such an overwhelming conspiracy by the media and others to keep silent about racism. It was another reminder for me of the necessity to address Mattie's question---and to raise the issue of racism.

Another white teacher who was interviewed at Peters also said that she had walked away from the town meeting assuming that Delpit had indicated that only African Americans could adequately teach African American children. Interestingly though, after having heard Delpit's talk, she reported, she bought *Other People's Children*, but was still convinced that Delpit believed white teachers could not effectively teach African American children. Like Ms. Smith this teacher also seemed to love her students, yet, as Rokeach suggested, she filtered new information through her unconscious ethnic prejudices. Unlike many others, though, her interview suggested that she was open to the value of knowing about and using the culture of her children in their classroom.

However, one of the African American teachers whom I interviewed was as surprised as I when her white colleagues misread Delpit. In addition, she related that before the partnership, she believed, the faculty at Peters assumed instruction "couldn't be done any other way" than the way it was already being done. She believed that one of the best things about the partnership was that it got people talking about change. Before the partnership, she said, no one listened to

parents and no one "was used to someone watching what was going on" in classrooms. "All of a sudden," she continued, "When the director of UACC began visiting the schools, it put a different set of eyes on the school; people began to pay attention to what teachers were doing or not doing in their classrooms."

After a number of interviews, it became clear that many mainstream faculty members at Peters Elementary did not want to confront any assumptions of racism. This, of course, was probably not the only reason for the withdrawal. The mutual miscommunications, misinformation, and misunderstandings as reported during several of the faculty interviews suggest that other factors may have played a role. However, the cultural and ethnic tensions that existed amongst the faculty, which surfaced as they briefly participated in the school's self assessment, seemed to be a significant factor in the ending of the partnership.

During the first year of UACC, in the three schools where there was a large mix of white and African American faculty, individual teachers and parents, most of whom were African American, confessed concerns about racist attitudes present in their schools to the director and sometimes to university fellows. Yet in larger meetings with the entire faculty, these concerns were rarely raised. This reluctance seemed to echo Mattie's words.

I witnessed such an avoidance at a school's faculty meeting called specifically to deal with its first year's evaluation. One of the components of the UACC was the school's self assessment of what worked well at the school and what did not work well in raising the level of achievement of their African American students. Part of that assessment included the help of "a university fellow" to interview representatives from administration, faculty, students, parents, and staff about their interpretation of the school's strengths and weaknesses. This data was to be used in the school's design of an action plan for school change. At one of the schools, the

university fellow asked me to facilitate the meeting while she reported the findings of her interviews and asked the faculty to brain storm three main themes for school change. Though the issue of racism was reported as a concern of some of those who had been interviewed, when the faculty decided in that meeting on its main themes for school change, it ignored racism as a possible issue to be explored.

A year later, however, this school, with the constant prodding of its university fellow, is now investigating anti-racism workshops for interested members of its faculty, parents, and staff. Though only a handful have voiced interest, it is a beginning.

At the start of our second year of the project, we heard rumors that the school with the predominantly white faculty and students was considering withdrawing from the UACC. The principal, Ms. Jones', shared this decision first with the principal of one of the neighboring UACC schools. When our director learned about it from the other principal, she attempted to contact Ms. Jones to suggest a meeting to discuss the school's decision. It took a number of weeks for the phone calls to be returned. Eventually, though, a meeting was agreed upon. Late in the fall, the director, the university fellow, and I met with the principal to discuss her reasons for ending the partnership. During that meeting the principal related the concerns of her faculty. A major concern, she said, was the African-centered pedagogy recommended by some of the experts who participated in an Educational Expo sponsored by the UACC. The Expo was designed to bring together school staffs from around the country who had proven successful in raising the academic achievement of urban African American children. These experts were invited to present their "best practices" and educational philosophies to representatives from the UACC schools. The Winchell faculty, Ms. Jones said, believed that some of the African centered strategies demonstrated at the Expo relied too heavily on memorization and rote drills.

The faculty believed that strategies typically supported by UACC lacked opportunities for developing higher order thinking, They maintained this belief even though at the first Town Meeting, Delpit emphatically had said (and illustrated with examples) that "Whatever methodology or instructional program is used, **demand critical thinking**." Her ten factors had also been reprinted in the participants' orientation retreat notebooks. (See factor 2 in footnote [23])

Another concern of Winchell's faculty was the UACC's suggestion that the schools use the greatest amount of money from the grant for staff development. Her faculty, Ms. Jones said, felt that they wanted to be free to spend the majority of the budget on after school tutors to teach the low achievers to read as well as to use grant money to purchase more reading materials for the students. Their action plans for change seemed to focus on what others could do for these children, outside the normal school day, and on what more or better materials could do.

She also said that her faculty believed that for the amount of money received from the grant, there was too much time and energy demanded. The faculty, she reported, believed that their teaching strategies were sufficient to meet the needs of most of their children and that parental involvement was their major challenge; and, she insisted, they could and were already attempting to accomplish that on their own. Most of their assumptions contradicted the research on effective schools of students with low socioeconomic status. In an extensive study of "unusually effective schools" in Louisiana and California elementary schools, it was found that:

> The clearest differential between unusually effective [with low socioeconomic status (SES)] and less effective middle SES schools involved a tendency for teachers in the former group to push students harder academically and to take greater "responsibility" for students' achievement than did teachers in "typical" middle SES schools (Levine, 1990).

The insistence of the Winchell faculty to hold to their assumption that they were doing all they could do to help these children achieve, and that only better parental involvement, better

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[9] Fictitious name

materials, or outside tutors could make a difference was a fascinating dynamic. Not only did these assumptions contradict the findings of the research on effective schools, but also they compounded the low academic achievement of their African American students who lived in public housing.

Ms. Jones also mentioned that her faculty was interested in the whole language approach and insinuated that phonics programs were not acceptable to them. Some of the experts at the Expo as well as Delpit suggested that poor children of color, who are not exposed in their preschool years to literate activities, often need a stronger emphasis on phonics than their middle class counterparts. Most of the current literature on language literacy and the urban poor support these conclusions. The misinterpretation of the Winchell faculty about African centered pedagogy as well as their assumptions that phonics supporters were arguing against whole language suggested, to me, the propensity of us mainstream teachers to either resist the voices or misinterpret the messages of African American educators. We do this even with those educators who have been proven effective with the same students whom this faculty was failing. Although I have lived in the thick of racism all of my life, this particular behavior never ceases to confound me.

Later when the Winchell faculty was individually interviewed, they repeated many of the same beliefs reported by the principal, especially the budget concerns. A number of teachers mentioned the faculty's desire to spend the money received through UACC for more reading materials and more tutors, or more computers, indicating again to me their denial about a need for teachers to change strategies, attitudes about learning potentials, or expectations of achievement. The fault for the low achievement was firmly placed in the lap of the children and the parents. When I asked each teacher what they thought was the cause of the academic failure

of their low achieving African American students, the majority plainly said the lack of parental involvement in the school life of the child and the assumed dysfunctional home lives of children living in the projects. One teacher said "I can't imagine having some of the problems that these children face and coming to school and excelling." The same teacher said, "We've reached a level [with some of these children] where it's not going to go any further." To consciously "write off" the potential success of anyone who is ten years old or younger astounds me. Nevertheless, many of the teachers shared this same sense of hopelessness for their low achieving students who lived in the projects.

I asked several teachers, "What would you say to a parent who came to you and said, 'Well, you have my child six to eight hours a day, why do you need my involvement to teach him to read?'" One of the teachers responded that "There's nobody that just six to eight hours a day is going to do it." Another, responding to the same question, said, "Six to eight hours a day is not enough time to do everything with the children. Children need to see that parents value education in their school." These assumptions seem to go unchallenged with most teachers. Even though there is a body of research that indicates that children can achieve academic excellence through instruction during school hours without the involvement of their parents, the pervasive idea is that parental involvement is a necessity for academic excellence. Not only from research studies but also from my own experience with children in housing projects, I have learned that this is absolutely false.

Interestingly, two of the teachers who were interviewed suggested that there was an assumption of the faculty that they didn't need to change their instruction:

> I think the other thing is that teachers began to realize that they were going to have to be willing to look at other alternatives from what they had always done. There are just some teachers over here that aren't willing to do that. They have all the answers and there's just nothing you can teach them. Even if it was trying these with just that one little group. It's sort of like they want something that supposedly works for everybody and if it doesn't it's not their fault . . . . That's not every teacher over here but it's a large majority of the teachers.

This observation of the teacher supported Williams definition of racism, of "circling repetitively back upon the expired utility of the entirely known." Often mainstream teachers, as well as others, believe that what they know about instruction is all that is necessary to be known.

Both of the teachers, who voiced observations about the overall faculty's propensity to stick to instruction that they already knew, seemed to have a better sense of the culture of the African American children in the school than the rest of their faculty. The majority of the mainstream teachers that I interviewed at both Peters and Winchell had difficulty answering the question: "What have you learned about the culture of the African American students at your school?" One teacher while stumbling with the question, "What are the strengths of your African American children?" blurted out, "Their strength is definitely at least they can dance." The other two teachers, however, talked about the power of the extended family of their African American students, the value of the students' involvement in churches, and their talents in "drawing and other cultural and performance arts."

While interviewing the teachers and the principal, I got a sense that the faculty worked hard, thought they were open to change, and sincerely wanted their children to succeed. Yet there was this pervasive feeling of doubt about the capacity of their low achieving African American children to learn at any higher level. The realities of the home lives of these children seemed to convince these teachers that there was little that they as teachers could do to overcome those life circumstances which the teachers assumed kept the children from learning to read or compute. Their suggestions for school change of more tutors for the children and more involvement of the parents seemed to indicate a belief that teachers lack the power to increase the level of academic achievement for these children. The responsibility and the solutions for these particular children's achievement, the teachers seemed to imply, lay outside their

classrooms. On the other hand, their interviews suggested that the teachers had every confidence their instruction made a difference in the lives of their mainstream students.

Yet the studies in California and Louisiana of "unusually effective schools in low SES" neighborhoods found that "home-school cooperation was weak and parent involvement was 'limited' and that high expectations for students originated largely from the school rather than the 'home and school.'" Our mainstream myth about the children's incapacity to learn without appropriate support from parents is time and again dispelled. The research in the last several decades by numerous scholars like Delpit, Hilliard, Irvine, Ladson- Billings, Nobles, Sizemore, etc. has indicated that economically disenfranchised African American children, regardless of what's missing in their home lives, can and do achieve academic excellence if teachers expect and demand it of them. Why is it, then, that we in the mainstream keep resisting these documented messages? Is it because the messages come from people of color? The principal and the teachers at Winchell Elementary had all read Delpit's book which emphasized the need to learn the culture of the children *from the children* and their parents and then bring it into the instruction of the classroom, whenever possible. This, of course, is a strategy dependent on developing personal relationships with those students. Her book also stressed the need to include explicit instruction, like phonics, with children who needed it, within the context of demanding critical and creative thinking. Again after having read her book as well as after hearing African American educators at the Expo prescribe the same, Winchell's teachers insisted that their method of teaching "critical thinking" and "whole language" was far more valuable. These same teachers had heard and applauded Hilliard when he had spoken to an assembly of all of the faculties in their system about the success of students in classrooms where teachers expected and demanded excellence of all African American children. Nevertheless, the teachers at Winchell,

with no empirical data of their own to suggest that their strategies worked for their low achieving African American children, still chose to ignore the research of these noted African American scholars. They continued doing what Williams saw as the behavior of racism----"circling repetitively back upon the expired utility of the entirely known." What reasons but racism are we left to consider?

I've heard university educators and others suggest that maybe the reasons for resistance rest in the fact that some teachers just don't want to change. But from listening to the teachers at these schools and observing them in their classrooms, I was convinced that they and the administrators worked hard at what they knew to do, and on a conscious level wanted to change if they thought it could make a difference. But there was the "rub." The teachers' unconscious racist assumptions about the children, the African American children of the poor, drove their expectations and their pedagogy----and their resistance to the voices of African American educators with proven records of success.

At all of the schools, even those who chose to end the partnerships, there were, of course, both white and African American faculty who took time to develop lessons that incorporated the culture of their students. They used creative strategies that built on the interests of the students. In one school a white teacher used movement to teach reading. In another school, a white male teacher used drama and role playing to teach abstract ideas and asked students to develop a dictionary of African American language. In another school where a white and African American teacher were team teaching, their connection to each student in the class manifested itself in a myriad of ways, including the language they used to address their students that signified a caring community of learners. And in one school, the white principal continuously searched for new ways to meet the needs of her African American students. She, from the

beginning of the project, admitted with great concern, "We are not giving our Black kids what they need to excel. We need to make serious changes in our school to make that happen." Some of the African American teachers regularly used the culture of the children to teach them new concepts. Two of those teachers at one school said, "We are helping other faculty members learn culturally responsive pedagogy by sharing our materials and strategies." Yet at all the schools, there was a pervasive struggle to transcend societal racist notions about the ability of their poor African American students to succeed.

Through this work with the UACC, I have become even more aware of Mattie's question. Yet I am still no closer to the answer. I have continuously watched as too many of us white people refuse to talk about or recognize racism. I've sat in meetings for hours where we talk about the inadequacies of the education of the urban child, yet we never discuss the role that racist politics, economics, and educational attitudes play in the miseducation of these children. The complexities of their "inadequate home lives" are often bemoaned and the incompetence of some of their teachers, but the consequences of racism in educating children seems never to be raised. As I continue to sit in these meetings, work with public schools, and remember my own silence in Boston, I am convinced that Joseph Feagin, a white educator at the University of Florida, is right when he says, "Most whites in this country are running as fast as they can from a candid, honest, open discussion of race and racism in the United States"(Reflections, p.18).

Nevertheless, until more of us of the dominant culture begin to break the silence about racism, my experience suggests that in many classrooms of white teachers and some African American teachers very little will happen to support the academic achievement of urban children of the poor. And in most of those classrooms, it will not be because the teachers don't want these children to achieve. It will be because their unchallenged and unconscious racism thwarts

these children at every turn. So I think the first step in allowing these children to excel is our willingness to listen to the children, the parents, and the communities we serve. We also need to begin to listen more attentively to African American researchers, scholars, and teachers who understand the culture of the children we teach and who know how to move these children toward excellence. We need to engage in the kind of listening suggested in Delpit's, *Other People's Children* (Delpit, 1997):

> As a result of careful listening to alternative points of view, I have myself come to a viable synthesis of perspectives. But both sides do need to be able to listen, and I contend that it is those with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process.
>
> To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment - and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be some one else and the only way to start the dialogue.

Though what Delpit suggests can be applicable to all of us when we occupy seats of power, her words are especially significant for white women who teach in the public schools. We must be willing to see ourselves in the "unflattering light" of the stories of our past, the histories of our abuses against people of color, as well as the stories of our present privileges. Those realities, along with our positions of power in our own classrooms, demand that we continually examine our racist assumptions, be unafraid to raise the issue of racism, and begin to create safe environments where children can learn about it, talk to each other about it, and learn how to disengage from it. If we refuse to raise the issue, we, then, as Rokeach indicates, damage the development of mainstream children as well, perpetuating the cycle of fear and hostility that cripples the country.

But before we open up the dialogue with our students, we need to talk about racism to each other as teachers. Because white teachers make up the majority of the teaching work force in America (GPTV, 1996), and because racism is damaging the children we teach, we have a

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responsibility to struggle with it amongst ourselves. We need to discover how to create for ourselves safe spaces for such serious dialogue. Confronting racism head on often wrings guilt, shame, anger, or despair from us causing great discomfort. We need to explore together how to sit with the discomfort long enough to move through these emotions toward a place of healing. But if we continue to wallow in denial about the impact of racism on our children, we can never rid ourselves or society of its abuses, much less begin to heal as a community of humans.

"To suspend our beliefs" about racism so that we can hear the experience of others, especially those of our children, seems imperative. We cannot continue to deny it, be defensive about it, see it as only the problem of people of color. It is our disease, white people's disease. And, thus, it is our responsibility to initiate the conversations. We cannot wait for people of color to raise it. I think, they're weary of the conversation. Remarkable educational leaders like Alonzo Crim (Crim, 1991) and renowned scholars like Delpit and Hilliard, all African Americans, don't really talk about racism because it seems to get them and their people nowhere. Instead they spend their energies teaching teachers and the rest of us how to respectfully serve children.

And, I believe, they are right to resist the conversation with white people. In my experience, especially when facilitating diversity workshops, if black people name it, the whites in the group simply accuse them of being "too sensitive," of misreading their words or behavior. We white folks seem to think that if we don't use the word "nigger" then we must not be racist. We are crippled by a disease that we can't even call out loud. Yet we are drenched in a bloody American history of hundreds of years of racism. Whatever our personal awareness of it, racism still exists as a matter of course in every institution we are associated with. We cannot escape it. As Taylor Branch says in *Parting the Waters*, "Almost as color defines vision itself, race shapes

the cultural eye---what we do and do not notice, the reach of empathy and the alignment of response"(Branch, 1988).

Many African American educators and parents are busy helping their children heal from the abuses of racism so these children can achieve in spite of it. We can't expect African Americans to heal us. Their focus is and must be spent cradling their communities, creating safe places for their children and families. Yet on some level we all know that if white people don't deal with racism, none of our children will be safe.

Starting the dialogue, raising the issue, is probably the next step after learning to listen to those who have been most damaged by it. And it's a big step since we all know our penchant in the dominant culture for running away from such dialogue. Yet until we address the issue, as Parks suggests, we cannot adequately solve the myriad of problems that emanate from it:

> . . . teen violence, safe schools, gang behavior, drop-out and suspension rates, diversity and equity in personnel policies and school administration, poor achievement among students of color, inequity in school funding, and the needs of children living in poverty. Such school problems directly or indirectly reflect past or present racism and may not be meaningfully remedied until racism is addressed (Parks, p.14).

But after addressing racism, then what? I think the "then what" becomes designing education for all children, white and children of color, as Paulo Freire defined it, as a liberation of the mind---because all children need to be liberated from an education that supports elitism. White children's minds are stunted as well by a system that supports "the pathological contamination of a large body of its clients"(Clark, 1989). Those contaminated clients are the children living in poverty, especially children of color. In an educational system where the histories and cultures of Africans, Native Americans, Asians, Latinos, etc. are minimized, trivialized or completely ignored, everyone's children lose. They lose because all children then absorb a truncated view of world realities, a seriously limited sense of the cosmic whole. In a

21st century world where 82% of its population will be people of color (DTH, 1995), how will our privileged white children ever learn to operate in that world if all they ever explore in school is their own cultural truths. How will they understand, much less communicate with those who represent 82% of the planet's population? Our ever-expanding global village will demand that they communicate in far more effective ways than most of the present adults in their lives do.

There really are no winners in an elitist system of education. For, ultimately, even at home, the elitist suffers. He is afraid to walk down some of his own streets in the cities he has helped build because he has engineered a permanent undereducated underclass who is angry, and out of that anger, is exploding in violence. That violence is perpetrated not only by some of the angry poor, but also, as witnessed recently, by children in middle class communities. It is practiced as well by the elite whenever their "knee jerk" reaction to global resolution of conflict is building more tanks, bombs and missiles to terrorize other countries when the behavior of those countries does not serve "our national interest." If that's the best in "creative problem-solving" that the graduates from our present educational systems can muster, then our schools are cheating all our students. I believe that when education ignores racism, supporting notions of privilege and supremacy, all of our children's minds are trapped into a never-ending cycle of violence.

When I consider the kind of change that our educational system needs to make, I always think of Hilliard's challenge to school systems and university teacher preparation systems:

> Revolution, not reform, is required to release the power of teaching. . . . Virtually, all teachers possess tremendous power which can also be released, given the proper exposure. We can't get to that point by tinkering with a broken system. We must change our intellectual structures, definitions and assumptions; then we can release teacher power (Hilliard, 1997).

In my work in the UACC, Hilliard's words continuously echoed. It wasn't that these teachers were incompetent. They were quite competent at what they assumed was "correct

pedagogy." It wasn't that they didn't want what was best for their students. It was that they were operating out of a system whose "intellectual structures, definitions and assumptions" are based on racist philosophies and epistemologies. Those assumptions prevented them from seeing African-American children and parents as real three-dimensional people (not statistics), with brilliant potential. Those philosophies stole the teachers' power. Over and over again when talking to these teachers, I heard intimations of how powerless they felt to teach African American children who live in poverty. The media, educational systems, governmental agencies, probably every institution they were connected to had convinced them that there was little they could do for these children's academic success because their poverty, lack of parental support, or emotional needs had crippled them. The teachers were so steeped in their own unconscious racist belief systems that they either could not hear or refused to listen to the messages of African American scholars and researchers, messages that could have given them back their sense of power. And by reclaiming the power to teach all children, the teachers, in turn, could empower all children to excel. And then, we'd have our revolution, one where everybody wins.

Maybe the why of Mattie's question about racism is not as important as the question itself? Just the asking of the question might, at least, initiate a conversation that could lead us to a search for integrity, a wholeness that this country has only dreamed of.

Nevertheless, the "why" of her question still plagues me. But one of the answers to her "why" may have been explained recently in a conversation I had with a friend when Maya Angelou was in town for the Black Arts Festival. I invited my "liberal" white friend to attend the event with me. After the powerful performance of Maya, I asked my friend how he enjoyed the evening. He said he thought she was quite exciting. I asked him what he liked best about her

recitation, and he said it was her humor and her last poem of the night, "And then, I rise." We both raved about those moments in her presentation; and, then, sensing some unsaid dissatisfaction with the night, I asked him what he liked least. And he said, "Her racist comments at the beginning." Surprised at this response, not having heard any racist remarks myself, and believing as Hilliard suggests that an oppressed people cannot be racist, I asked what specifically did she say or intimate that smacked of racism for him. He said that it was her comment that Blacks were in America before Columbus as well as her comments on the racist practices of white Americans. I pushed him further by saying that, to me, those comments didn't represent racism, rather they represented historical fact. And, then, he said "Well, it all made me feel uncomfortable." Continuing to probe, wanting to get at his rationale, I asked him what he thought was the source of his discomfort. Was it really racism or something else? Finally, without any further questions by me, he said "Shame." Shame was the source of his discomfort. Shame as a white man "for the hideous crimes against Blacks and Native Americans." In that moment he crystallized for me what for years I have sensed may be at the core of our refusal as white people to address racism.

It is this same shame that, I think, many of us white people don't want to face because we don't know how to go past it. Nothing in the culture teaches us how to experience it and move through it toward conciliation. Unlike many modern psychologists, however, I think there are times when shame is appropriate. When my Euro-centric culture has for four thousand years committed heinous crimes against other peoples of the world, feeling remorse is probably one of the most sane things I can do; that is, if I intend to avoid getting stuck there and, instead, move toward redress. After all, nobody wants to be in a room filled with people stuck in shame.

Nevertheless, during the work with the UACC as I watched people shut down whenever the word, racism, came into the conversation, I thought about the "why"of Mattie's question. My hunch is that unconscious shame could have been at the core of how 15 white women sat silent about racism in that room in Boston. Perhaps, somewhere in our collective unconscious is the memory of how our grandmothers or great grandmothers "forgot" to voice their objection to other women and children being enslaved, beaten, raped, murdered. Perhaps somewhere in our unconscious is the memory that our mothers or someone's mothers paid the women of other cultures slave wages to clean their houses, take care of their children, cook their meals. That, maybe, somewhere in our psyches is the realizations that we, women, continue to pay "illegal immigrants" slave wages to work in our homes and, then, refuse to allow those women decent health care or their children the right to education. These memories and realizations if surfaced would have to create shame. Why else would we keep them so deeply buried. If not, then why are we afraid to explore the consequences of institutional racism on children? How is it that white people come together over and over again to talk about serious issues and rarely, if ever, initiate a dialogue about racism?

If we believe, as many mystics, poets, scientists, psychologists, and African cultures that we are all one in the universe, and inextricably bound to one another, then we in the dominant culture must own our part in the plight of the oppressed. We must stop blaming the victim of the oppression and look into our own past and present for the responsibility as well as the privileges resulting from racism. Then, maybe, we can move through the shame and into healthy resolution of the conflicts we have unconsciously masterminded.

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Like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Andrew Young and all the freedom fighters of the Civil Rights era, I believe that through confronting racism in our culture, we can begin to "redeem America's soul" (Young, 1996).

That redemption, I do understand, will not come from attempts on my part to bludgeon others with the righteousness of any ideology. Righteousness is rarely effective and usually damaging. I also clearly understand that, whatever our culture, we have deep seated prejudices that surface every now and then, uninvited maybe, but very much a part of us. And dealing with that reality is a life long challenge. To be able to admit to those ugly realities, though, especially those of us who are in the dominant culture, is, I think, the first step toward the redemptive process, a process that makes all children winners.

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